

Conference report

Nature Conservation: the Role of Networks held in Geraldton, Western Australia 16–20 May, 1994

Over 200 conservation biologists, ecologists, managers, landowners and private citizens from 14 countries met to explore the themes that networks of people are our conservation force and networks of other organisms are our conservation resource. Ninety-four oral and 25 poster papers were presented at the conference. The major conclusions were that there was a need for greater trust between professional and government agencies, scientists, community groups, landowners and individuals and a greater involvement of indigenous people in tackling nature conservation problems.

In most parts of the world, government agencies have the primary responsibility for conservation of native fauna and flora. However, these agencies do not have the resources to meet their objectives let alone the full demands of the public. The loss of species and the continuing decline in ecosystem functioning is receiving increased attention from the media, the public and through legislation. If nature conservation is to succeed, conservation agencies need to work with and among communities. However, community effort must never be used simply as a substitute for government action.

The survival of human society depends on all land being managed sustainably. This demands that entire landscapes plus seascapes, not just individual reserves, be managed in an integrated and holistic way. This increased dimension of conservation can only be achieved by the joint action of the full community as well as greater co-operation between different agencies and scientists. The past single discipline training of scientists together with the fragmented management of urban, agricultural, marine and terrestrial conservation lands has limited the advances in nature conservation. The dimensions and urgency of conservation problems in all countries are extreme and there are benefits from greater effort through co-operation. All scientists and government officials were urged to associate formally with community groups. The need for action rather than just words was a recurrent comment in many papers and subsequent discussion.

If government and other agencies and community groups are to work successfully together, it is necessary to recognise that communities are not a cheap labour force to be exploited or used by such agencies. Instead communities are an essential component and must be treated as equal partners in development of policy, objectives and management, if effective conservation is to be achieved. Active and equal involvement produces understanding and commitment whereas education and talking is easily forgotten.

It is necessary to identify all the stakeholders in nature conservation, establish their values and needs, and then design programmes with them rather than for them.

The wide range of conservation groups in Australia such as Landcare, Watercare, National Threatened Species Network, Roadside Conservation Committees and the Marine and Coastal Network was the envy of delegates from other countries. The conference was sponsored by the Australian Nature Conservation Agency, Alcoa of Australia, the Gordon Reid Foundation for Conservation and Worldwide Fund for Nature.

Conference delegates were welcomed by the local Yamatji Aboriginal people — a first for an Australian conservation conference. Papers were presented which gave examples of the participation of indigenous peoples in nature conservation in Australia, Costa Rica, New Zealand, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tanzania and Uganda. The conference recommended that partnership with indigenous people at all levels of planning and action is essential for conservation success. Indigenous people typically have a strong feeling of place that engenders responsibility and identity — important components for the development of sustainable, long-term nature conservation practices. There is also a strong cultural basis for conservation activities which cannot be ignored.

Also present at the conference were 10 high school students from Perth and Geraldton (Western Australia). They made a plea on behalf of their future for plainer language so that more people can understand the issues and hence become involved and active in conservation. They provided a model for networking schools into nature conservation.

The proceedings of the conference will provide a wide range of views and many successful examples of networking people and nature to achieve greater conservation. This will be published in 1995 as the fourth in Surrey Beatty & Sons (Chipping Norton, New South Wales) Nature Conservation series under the title of "Nature Conservation: the Role of Networks". A short summary booklet will also be made widely available.

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